

FOREWORD

The second volume of the Cultural, Peace and Conflict Studies Series offers thoughtful insights for scholars and readers interested in the wide range of phenomena that in public discourses are referred to as ‘radicalism’ and ‘extremism’.

Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly after the terror attacks of 9/11, it has become almost common knowledge that the haunting ‘spectre of extremism’ looms over our democratic and progressive, liberal and civilized, rational and tolerant societies. Within mainstream humanity, individuals pursue their own happiness or keep themselves to themselves, interest and pressure groups strive in a constructive and civilized manner for social good according to what they believe, and we consider public policies legitimate and ‘consented to’ when they result from rational debate and genuine compromise, even when they differ from our own personal desires.

In contrast to the ‘normal’ mainstream, typical extremists are believed to rely on passion instead of interest, on religious prejudices instead of secular reason, on uncompromising fundamentalist beliefs instead of consensus and public deliberation working towards compromise. The connections between extremist behaviour, ideas and forms of organization are thought to exist by assumption, not by evidence. As a rule of thumb, extremist ideas are believed to be religious, extremist organizations hierarchic, monolithic and authoritarian, extremists deemed lacking in individual autonomy and an individual sense of identity, and extremist behaviour is generally considered strongly unconventional if not manifestly terrorist in nature. Such greatly simplified representations of extremism can cause confusion and stir up many questions in anyone who seriously wants to make sense of the phenomenon itself.

When an overwhelming part of humanity observes some form of religion it cannot be religion itself that causes or sustains extremism. If extremism is related to a particular kind of religion, do its associated manifestations of religious extremism resemble manifestations of ideological extremism? If ideologies and religions can be both extremist and non-extremist should we discard all essentialist references to religion in our understanding of extremism? Does extremism resemble ‘public order’, which can be measured and assessed universally, or is it like ‘secularism’ and ‘tolerance’ which acquire substantive meanings only in their social and cultural environments? Can extremism be said to be a defining trait of personality and character that distinguishes some people or groups from the ‘normal’ others? Or is it like ‘anger’ and ‘aggression’ which are usually judged as good or bad depending on the specific context in which they manifest? Should extremism be categorized as a subtype of worldviews (similar to ‘convinced atheists’ or non-practicing ‘zen-buddhists’) or as a form of social deviation (similar to ‘criminals’ and ‘public enemies’)?

These are only some of the questions which might arise when one attempts to define extremism.

This volume contributes to studies on extremism by using interdisciplinary perspectives and a variety of academic approaches, and by keeping the general perspective on the topic sufficiently wide so that our subjective preferences and analytical assumptions do not rule out the possibility that extremism might exist ‘within’ ourselves too as individuals, scholars, groups, cultures, and religious and political communities. Throughout this volume extremism is conceptualized in a way that enables us to assess and evaluate extremism not only within the problematic ‘Other’ but also within the ‘Self’.

The contributors to this volume come from several academic disciplines (Theology, Political Science, Sociology, International Relations) and investigate extremism using analytical, theoretical, empirical, historical and social constructionist perspectives. The organization of these papers enables the reader to follow this analysis of extremism from abstract and general to specific and particular, from theoretical to practical, and from the historical to the contemporary.

Due to the limited scope of the volume, the specific case-studies on extremism ‘out there’ focus only on a limited number of historical examples and contemporary issues. Among the latter, the contributions specifically focus on issues related to religion, culture, terrorism and gender in the contemporary world, in accordance with the way extremism is perceived in present public discourse. The whole view on extremism, however, would of course be somewhat unbalanced if due attention were not also given to Atheist, Secularist and Fascist versions of extremism in recent Western history.

The topical idea for this volume originates from the conference “Extremism Within and Around Us” that was held in Tartu, Estonia on April 16th 2010, under the auspices of the Estonian National Defence College where earlier versions of several of these papers were first presented and discussed.

As editors, we are deeply grateful to all who have contributed to this volume. We also give our thanks to the Estonian National Defence College for organizing the conference and funding the project, and to *Roy Lowthian*, *David W. E. Thomas*, *Epp Leete*, *Karen Kuldnokk*, *Reet Hendrikson* and to the staff of the University of Tartu Press for their help in finalizing this collective effort.

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